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C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 000593

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, PRM/ANE

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

E.O. 12958: DECL:

TAGS: PGOV PREF PHUM PTER CE KWMM

SUBJECT: Displaced person returns to Sri Lanka's north/east continue to swell

Refs: Colombo 543, and previous

(U) Classified by Lewis Amsalem, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The number of displaced persons returning to Sri Lanka's north/east continues to swell and now stands at 270,000. The returnees are Tamil; few are Muslim. In other trends, many Tamils also appear to be leaving the war-ravaged north/east in search of economic opportunities in the south. The high number of returnees seems to represent a vote of confidence in the peace process. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) RETURNS SWELL: In its latest figures, UNHCR has told us that the total number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who have returned to their points of origin in the north/east has swelled to over 270,000 as of the end of January. UNHCR reports that 35,000 additional returnees went back to their home areas in the three-month time span between late 2002 and January 2003. UNHCR estimates that the rate of return will continue at a clip of about 10,000 a month for the foreseeable future. Given the time-lag in its figures, this means that as of April 2003 close to 300,000 IDPs may have returned to their home areas since the start of the peace process in December 2001.

¶3. (C) MUSLIMS STAY PUT: The vast majority of the returnees continue to travel to the Jaffna Peninsula in northern Sri Lanka and to points in the east. The returnees are invariably Tamil. The number of Muslim IDPs returning to their home areas is very, very low. (Note: Explaining this phenomenon, M.I.M. Mohideen, chairman of the Muslim Rights Organization (MRO), recently released a statement asserting that Muslims simply did not trust the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, "LTTE." According to Mohideen, despite LTTE entreaties, Muslims are not comfortable with the group and do not plan to return to their homes in the north soon.)

¶4. (SBU) MANY TAMILS GO SOUTH, TOO: In addition to the high rate of returns by IDPs, there are also indications that many Tamils are leaving the north/east in search of education and employment in the south. Non-government organizations (NGOs) focused on migration have noted that the economic situation in the south remains much, much better than that in the war-torn north/east. In light of the reopening of many roads throughout the country, Tamils can now easily move back-and-forth, allowing many to try their luck in the south. (Note: In the past, before the start of the peace process, it was very difficult for Tamils to move around the country due to the war and government security regulations.) Many of the Tamils who go south wind up in Colombo, where the Tamil community constitutes perhaps a third of the population.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: The continued high rate of returns seems to be a clear indication that Tamil IDPs have a high degree of confidence in the current peace process. That said, over 500,000 IDPs still remain in camps or with families in the south, and it is not clear when the bulk of these might go home (if ever). (Note: Mission has not heard any reports that indicate that the approximately 100,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India plan to return home at any time soon.) END COMMENT.

¶6. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS